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Relic Texts

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I have previously argued that religious traditions typically ritualize their scriptures in three dimensions (Watts 2006). They ritualize the interpretation of sacred texts (their semantic dimension) with preaching, teaching, commentary, and private study. They ritualize the performance of their sacred texts (their performative dimension) with liturgical readings, dramatic performances, artistic illustrations and private meditation. They ritualize the physical form of their sacred texts (their iconic dimension) by their elaborate manufacture, stereotypical appearance, public display and ritual manipulation. Other kinds of texts may be ritualized in one or two dimensions, but the regular ritualization of a text in all three dimensions usually distinguishes it as a sacred text, a scripture.

However, there are some texts, or more accurately some specific copies of texts, that tend to be ritualized only in the iconic dimension. Though highly venerated, people do not often read them and even more rarely interpret their meaning, nor do they perform most of them verbally or dramatically. That is, they are not ritualized in either the semantic or the performative dimensions very much. Examples of such texts include most books on prominent display in museums, such as the earliest known manuscripts of the Bible and the Qur'an, Gutenberg Bibles, Shakespeare's first folio and any valuable first edition, the autographs of the Declaration of the Independence and U.S. Constitution, and so on. Old or unusual copies of scriptures feature prominently among them, but so do political documents and works of literature.

I call such books "relic texts." Relic texts are valued for being the *specific* objects that they are. They are rare, if not one-of-a-kind, and are in theory not reproducible. Relics, as known from Christian and Buddhist traditions and many other religions, are more appropriate models for how such books function than are icons. Both icons and relics are believed to mediate the sacred. But the value of icons is that they are reproducible, whereas the value of relics lies precisely in the fact that they are unique. Of course, because the demand for relics always outstrips the supply, the (re-)production of relics has long been the subject of scandal.

Relic texts can be distinguished from other books by how they are ritualized in the three dimensions. The iconic dimension of relic texts dominates and eclipses the other two dimensions. They are not read or interpreted very much because they share their semantic and performative dimensions with other, non-relic copies of the same texts. Their social function therefore differs from other ritualized texts. Their authority is not invoked to settle disputes over doctrine nor do people usually look to them for help in achieving performative inspiration. Because relic texts are ritualized in the iconic dimension alone, their chief function is legitimation. Owning them legitimizes individuals and communities and conveys a sense of empowerment. Losing them threatens group identity.

These effects have appeared prominently in many recent news stories about how individuals, private institutions, and government agencies have gone to great efforts to gain and to keep particular relic texts for themselves. These stories show the similar ways that owners use their relic texts to legitimize themselves, their institutions, their nations, and their religions.

Legitimizing Owners

Relic books convey the prestige of being the owner of a famous object. For individual and institutional collectors, that prestige can be valuable, as Nate Pederson observed:

A tip to any public libraries struggling with declining patronage: go digging around in your vault! The public library in Windsor, Ontario discovered a Bible from 1585 languishing away in its vault earlier this year. Librarians promptly put the book on display and saw a 40 percent increase in visitors last month (*Fine Books & Collections*, October 4, 2011).

The same motive drives many text digitization projects. Libraries and museums put high definition images online of their most iconic books in hopes of drawing more people through their doors to see the real thing. They also offer for sale physical mementos of the relic text, ranging from cheap postcards of individual pages to expensive facsimile reproductions of the entire book.

Jonathan Z. Smith noted the effects of reproduction on the status of iconic books when he distinguished “the sacred book as a sacred object, one that is always manufactured and all but infinitely reproducible, and, therefore, one to which there is almost never attached a claim of being ‘original’” from reproductions that “become themselves the subjects of narratives, as is the case, for example, of the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Stonyhurst Gospel and the cult of St. Cuthbert” (Smith 1998, 298). Reproductions therefore seem to blur the distinctiveness of relic texts, producing what Zeev Elitsur termed “pseudo-relic books” (*Iconic Books Blog*, September 29, 2009). However, the tension between asserting the uniqueness of objects and producing many similar things for widespread distribution has been a characteristic feature of relic economies throughout history. In his study of the circulation of medieval bodily relics, Patrick Geary described their use to extend the influence of Popes:

The most important donor of relics was, of course, the Pope, who had at his disposal the vast treasury of the Roman catacombs, containing the remains of the early Roman martyrs. Prior to the mid-eighth century popes steadfastly refused to distribute these relics, preferring rather to distribute secondary relics or *brandia*, objects that had come into contact with the martyrs’ tombs From the mid-eighth century on, however, the Roman pontiffs began to exploit their inexhaustible supply of relics in order to build closer relationships with the increasingly powerful Frankish church to the north. (Geary 1986, 182-83)

Thus belief in the uniqueness of relics led to producing secondary relics and eventually finding ways to increase the number of apparently genuine relics available for distribution. Relic texts participate in the same kind of relic economy. It is characteristic of the use of relic texts that owners try to combine ritualized display of these unique objects with attempts to profit from sales of their reproductions. People also try to create new relic texts by making a reproduction somehow unique: hence the continual efforts to make the world’s largest Qur’an or Bible, or to

cast a scripture in gold plates, and so on (see e.g. *Iconic Books Blog*, June 25, 2007; September 21, 2007; August 11, 2009; April 9, 2012).

Private owners, by contrast, often want to hide relic texts and hoard their effects for themselves. Some people regard relic texts, like other kinds of relics, as having supernatural power. Scholars frequently ridicule such beliefs. They find the public's veneration of a text's iconic dimension problematic and complain that people should focus on the text's semantic contents instead. That normative judgment stems from the scholars' success in controlling textual authority through their own meritocratic system of semantic interpretation (see Watts 2010). But in order to gain access to relic texts owned by private persons, scholars often must seek allies in institutions and governments that want the legitimacy that comes from owning certain relic texts themselves. The different interests of individual owners, scholars and public institutions contributes to conflicts over relic texts.

For example, an international effort to preserve centuries-old Indonesian manuscripts had difficulty getting access to privately owned texts.

The surviving manuscripts were written in various languages and scripts, including Arabic, Malay, Javanese, Sundanese, Sasak, Balinese and the Wolio language of Buton Island. ... "The problem is that there are many more important ancient manuscripts in private hands," [the coordinator for digitization] said. "The owners usually refuse us access to them because they consider them sacred relics that have been handed down for generations." (*Jakarta Globe* June 26, 2009)

The Indonesian scholars only want access in order to make photographs and publish them digitally. The owners, however, seem to think this would desecrate the relic texts and weaken their potency.

Such conflicts do not just occur over religious texts. The same kind of issues swirl around secular relic books. A vivid example was provided by the publication of Carl Jung's *Red Book* for the first time in 2009. The famous psychoanalyst wrote and illustrated the book by hand over a sixteen-year period starting in 1914. In it, he recorded his dreams, active imaginations and self-induced hallucinations. These experiences became the basis for much of his later theorizing about myths, dreams, and the unconscious. Jung never published the book and his family refused to do so or even let very many people see it, until recently.

The *Red Book's* relic status derives from its impressive physical appearance and one-of-a-kind nature. Sara Corbett described the book and its publication under the headline, "The Holy Grail of the Unconscious" for which she wrote a characteristic description of a relic book: "The *Red Book* had an undeniable beauty. Its colors seemed almost to pulse, its writing almost to crawl" (*New York Times Magazine*, September 16, 2009). The reputation of the *Red Book* also depends on the story of its origins, what Dori Parmenter (2009, 299) calls the "legends of veracity" that surround relics and relic texts alike. Part of this story is the fact that Jung himself recognized the iconic power of textuality. One of his clients recorded his advice on how to process her inner life:

“I should advise you to put it all down as beautifully as you can — in some beautifully bound book,” Jung instructed. “It will seem as if you were making the visions banal — but then you need to do that — then you are freed from the power of them. . . . Then when these things are in some precious book you can go to the book & turn over the pages & for you it will be your church — your cathedral — the silent places of your spirit where you will find renewal. If anyone tells you that it is morbid or neurotic and you listen to them — then you will lose your soul — for in that book is your soul.” (quotation in Shamdasani’s footnotes to the *Red Book*)

In the *Red Book*, therefore, Jung intentionally created a ritualized relic text, if only for his own use. For later Jungians, its ritualization in the iconic dimension as a relic text precedes and lays the basis for its inspirational reading (performance) and semantic significance: “[Jungian analyst Stephen Martin] added ‘It gives me goose bumps just thinking about it.’”

Corbett documents how the claims of the *Red Book*’s private owners and public scholarship came into conflict, as they do with other relic books the world over. “To talk to Jung’s heirs is to understand that ... [they are] caught between the opposing forces of his admirers and critics and between their own filial loyalties and history’s pressing tendency to judge and rejudge its own playmakers.” The tension leads to conflicting claims of ownership that run deeper than legal title or historical claim. The article quotes Martin about the quandary faced by Jung’s family and by Jung’s followers, among whom he counts himself: “They own it, but they haven’t lived it,” he said, describing Jung’s legacy. “It’s very consternating for them because we all feel like we own it.”

Other recent news about conflicts over secular relic texts include the report that a lost poem by P. B. Shelley was rediscovered in 2010, then immediately bought and sequestered by a private collector. Michael Rosen, speaking for the interests of literary scholars, argued in *The Guardian* (July 23, 2010) that this should not be allowed. “We can easily envisage an owner owning a manuscript while we collectively own and know the piece of literature it contains.” He was also reacting to the ongoing legal battles over Franz Kafka’s papers between the heirs of the publisher’s secretary who possess them and the state of Israel’s claims on them. An Israeli judge’s order that the papers should be publicly inventoried was hailed as “a victory for the National Library of Israel and by Kafka scholars around the world” (*The Guardian*, July 21, 2010).

The tendency of relic texts to bring individuals, institutions and nations into conflict with each other exemplifies a typical feature of relic economies, as Geary observed:

High-prestige objects such as relics can play an important role in deeply divided communities. Disagreements and conflicts within society may be expressed and even conducted through disputes over the identity and value of such objects (Geary 1986, 188, citing Brown 1982, 222-50).

Circulating the pieces

Dealers often treat relic books like the relics of saints. Just as the bodies of dead saints were separated into small pieces to produce the maximum number of relics which were then

displayed in elaborate and often framed reliquaries, so book sellers often tear apart relic books to sell individual pages to collectors, who frame them like artwork for public display.

This practice can lead to new conflicts over ownership, identity and proper display. For example, the Getty Museum is fighting a legal battle to retain ownership of eight illuminated pieces of parchment from the 13th-century Zeyt'um Gospels. The Armenian Church claims the pages were stolen during the genocide of 1916 and the Getty does not hold legal title to them. This controversy involved debates not only over the ownership of the pages but also about the ethics of separating a manuscript into multiple parts. In its defense, the Getty cited common practice:

Elizabeth Morrison, the Getty's acting senior curator of manuscripts, said that "well-regarded ... collections around the world" contain individual manuscript sheets. "The Getty in no way condones the practice of taking apart manuscripts, but we continue to collect individual leaves after careful examination proves that they have not recently been removed ... with motives of financial gain." (*Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 2011)

Her argument, then, is that there are legitimate motives for taking books apart, but the pursuit of profit is not one of them. She did not mention another common motive. Libraries and museums have often disassembled valuable codices in order to display more than two pages at one time, because display, not reading, is the typical way in which relic texts get used. Once disassembled, though, they are more easily sold in pieces, and perhaps more valuable that way. Both for display and for profit, then, codices frequently get treated like bodily relics by secular institutions.

The Armenian Church claimed that the pages belong with the rest of the manuscript. It received scholarly support for its position from Columba Stewart, the executive director of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. He argued that the manuscript should be reunited for reasons of art, scholarship and religious devotion. The *LA Times* quoted Stewart as saying

"It's better from an artistic perspective ... it can [then] be studied by scholars as a whole object." [Museums must avoid] "contributing to an improper fragmentation of a work." ... Beyond that, Stewart said, the Getty, ... should consider that these works are still venerated: "Here's a living, breathing religious community, as opposed to classical antiquities."

This tendency to parcel out relic texts produces other conflicts between private owners and institutionalized scholars who are trying to unify the pieces. For example, an Israeli museum has been trying to collect all the fragments of the oldest complete Hebrew Bible, the Aleppo Codex. But some owners have resisted parting from their pieces. One man always carried his small fragment with him for sixty years.

He was convinced that thanks to the parchment, which he kept with him always in a transparent plastic container, he had been saved from riots in his hometown of Aleppo during Israel's War of Independence, and he had managed to immigrate from Syria to the United States in 1968 and start a new life in Brooklyn and make a living. The charm was with him when he underwent complicated surgery. (*Haaretz*, November 6, 2007)

Only when he died did the fragment become available to the scholars at the Yad Ben-Zvi research institute in Jerusalem. They, however, had their own iconic interest in asking for the fragments to be turned over to Israel. The head of Yad Ben-Zvi said “This is the No. 1 asset of the Jewish people, and I believe the Jewish people would do a great deal to have it back” (*Haaretz*, December 3, 2007). This situation illustrates a typical conflict over relic texts that pits the interests of scholars speaking for a reified collective (in this case, “the Jewish people”) against the interests of individuals (the Jews from Aleppo). The relic text serves to legitimize the collective (“the No. 1 asset of the Jewish people”), but provides individual owners a sense of empowerment (a “good luck charm”). The Armenian Church was able, however, to mobilize at least some scholars to speak for a communal claim against that of a scholarly institution. Both cases invoke scholarship that is grounded in the authority of semantic interpretation to buttress attempts to control relic texts that legitimize institutional and communal identity.

These cases illustrate clearly the contested values that swirl around relic texts, especially those that have been partitioned and parceled out, as people are prone to do with relics. Claims of historical title mix with communal identity claims, aesthetic arguments and the interests of scholarship to contest the ownership, location, and display of relic texts.

Nationalistic relic texts

The case of the Aleppo Codex also highlights the nationalistic interests in controlling the legitimacy conveyed by relic texts. Many countries make such efforts because sales of ancient texts frequently raise nationalistic concerns. Relic books are regarded as one-of-a-kind, so they often carry significant associations with particular places or countries. In 2007, the British government imposed an export ban on the Wardington Hours, a fifteenth-century illuminated Book of Hours. It acted in order to give the British Library time to raise the money to match a German buyer’s offer (*BBC* June 27, 2007). Similarly, when the St Cuthbert’s Gospel was put up for sale by the Jesuits in 2012, the British Library raised £9 million to acquire what it called the world’s “oldest intact book,” since the original binding of this seventh-century manuscript of the Gospel of John has survived (see Brown 2010, 60). The British Library intends to digitize the book so that it is available to people “everywhere” online. But its campaign to raise the money emphasizes the urgency of keeping the Gospel “for the nation” because it is “a precious part of our heritage.”

The political symbolism carried by relic texts can bring governments in conflict with each other. In 2009, Jordan asked Canada to seize and hold some Dead Sea Scrolls manuscripts that were being displayed in Toronto (*Globe and Mail*, December 31, 2009). Israel took control of the scrolls after the 1967 war when it conquered east Jerusalem. Canada refused to seize the scrolls, deferring the issue until settlement of territorial conflicts in the Middle East. Very clear from all the news coverage were the identity issues at stake for the Middle Eastern governments involved (Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority). Every side tried to employ the scrolls as relic texts to legitimize their own group and contested the others’ claims to them:

On Sunday, Israeli officials released a statement saying the Jordanian claims are “completely ridiculous” and that the scrolls have little or no connection to Jordan’s history. ... Palestinians have argued the scrolls, dating as far back as 250 BC, are an integral part of their heritage also. (*CBC News*, January 3, 2010).

The same kinds of issues swirl around an Iraqi Jewish archive consisting of 3,000 documents and 1,700 antiquities. They were found in the flooded basement of the Iraqi intelligence building in Baghdad after the American invasion in 2003 and transferred to the United States for preservation. Iraq has now asked for them back because, according to the Iraqi ambassador, “They represent part of our history and part of our identity. There was a Jewish community in Iraq for 2,500 years” (*Washington Post*, April 30, 2010). But the head of an Israeli museum dedicated to Iraqi Jews argued that the materials should be sent there: “The books belong to the majority of the Iraqi Jews, and they are not in Iraq. The books should be given to us, as the representatives of the Jews of Iraq” (Associated Press, January 16, 2010). Such efforts led to headlines in the Arab press proclaiming, “Israel suspected of seeking to ‘steal’ ancient Iraqi manuscripts” (Al-Arabiya, June 4, 2012). Here an archive of historical interest became a relic when it was used to represent conflicting communal and national ownership claims.

Historic political documents can be even more central to nationalistic concerns. The legitimizing effect of ritual display plays a major role in the treatment of nationalistic relic texts, such as the manuscripts of the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Since 1952, they have been enshrined in the Rotunda of the National Archives in Washington, D.C. All copies of the Constitution and Declaration are iconic in American political culture, but the manuscripts in the Rotunda are relics: they are not displayed so that visitors can analyze their meaning in depth or read them aloud in their entirety (the Declaration, at least, is much too faded to do either very well) but for their material, visual effect alone. Asked “Why is it important for people to come here to see the declaration firsthand?”, Archives senior curator Stacey Bredhoff described the effect of viewing the Declaration of Independence this way:

I think there is some kind of magic in standing in front of the original document. You’re standing in front of the original Declaration of Independence, faded as it is, but still you can make out some of the signatures and you think, “Whoa, these people were real. This really happened.” (Gannett News Service, July 17, 2007).

Walt Disney Studios capitalized on this mystique by making the Declaration of Independence the key to finding another treasure in its 2004 film, “National Treasure,” that grossed \$347.5 million worldwide.

The mystique of relic texts moves historians too. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* (February 2, 2010) reported the re-discovery of a draft of the U.S. Constitution in the archives of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The researcher, Lorianne Updike Toler, reports the thrill of discovery in vivid language: “This was national scripture, a piece of our Constitution’s history,” she said of her find in November. “It was difficult to keep my hands from trembling.” As other researchers “realized what was happening, there was a sort of hushed awe that settled over the reading room,” Toler said. “One of them said the hair on her arms stood on end.”

When texts become so iconic, the degree of authenticity required for relic status can be negotiable. The original Declaration of Independence was printed overnight after its adoption and distributed by the hundreds in Philadelphia and throughout the colonies. Only then was the well-known manuscript now displayed in the Rotunda written and signed by the delegates when they reassembled two months later (NARA). Elitsur would therefore call the displayed document of the Declaration of Independence a “pseudo-relic”.

Nevertheless, relic texts linked to national history or ideals prompt political and financial efforts to preserve national ownership even if they cannot plausibly claim to be “the original.” The winning bidder for the 1297 Magna Carta auctioned by Sotheby's in 2007 was motivated by the desire to keep it in the USA.

David Rubenstein, co-founder of the Carlyle Group private equity firm, paid \$21.3m (£10.6m) for the document ... [He said] “I was concerned that the only copy that was in America would escape. I was convinced that it needed to stay here. This document stands the test of time. There is nothing more important than what it represents. ... This is a gift to the American people. It is important to me that it stays in the United States.” (*The Guardian*, December 19, 2007)

However, lest the former colonies congratulate themselves too much, Oxford's Bodleian library then indulged in what the *Guardian* characterizes as “scholarly one-upmanship” by displaying all four of its copies of the Magna Carta. Three date from 1217 and one from 1225, all older than the copy auctioned in New York. (The first charter was forced on King John in 1215. It is the 1297 version, however, that remains legally influential in England.) Attempts to keep a thirteenth-century copy of the Magna Carta in the United States date back to at least the 1930s, when the outbreak of World War II stranded Lincoln Cathedral's copy across the Atlantic. Rubenstein returned his copy to the National Archives in Washington, DC, which displays it near the U.S. founding documents in the Rotunda.

Efforts to control the Aleppo Codex, the Wardington Hours, and St. Cuthbert's Gospel show that governments do not limit their interest in relic texts to legal documents. Nations ritually index their identity and obligations through various kinds of relic texts just like individuals do.

Authenticity, Identity and Scholarship

As the above examples show, relic texts legitimize the person, institution or nation that owns and claims them, rather than providing the textualized authority and performative inspiration that humanistic scholarship usually addresses. They can also, however, be used to legitimize the textual tradition itself. Their antiquity and/or rarity can confirm the legitimacy of mass-produced copies of the same texts. Therefore relic texts can serve both scholarly and community or institutional stakes in particular textual traditions. Scholars consult relic books to authenticate details of the text, while public viewings of them serve to legitimate the prestige that the reproducible iconic text enjoys.

Owners involve scholars in ritualizing iconic texts and in disputes over ownership because the legitimizing effect of relic texts depends on belief in their authenticity. They must be as old and important as people say they are. The problem with relics has always been verifying their authenticity. Geary (1986, 186) described this process for any relic: “The account of the relics' translation had to itself become part of the myth of production - the story of how they had come to their new community was itself part of the explanation of who they were and what their power was.” This is no less true of relic texts, which “become themselves the subject of narratives” as J. Z. Smith noted (see also Dorina Miller Parmenter 2009). For example, the *New York Times* (April 13, 2010) reported that when questions were raised about the whether a

particular Torah scroll survived the Holocaust or not, the donor provided another scroll with a better attested Holocaust lineage. In this case, his goal was performative as well as iconic ritualization. The donor explained that he had donated the Torah to the synagogue “so its congregants could have the sacred experience of reading Scripture from a scroll that had survived the Holocaust. ... As one who has gone to the camps and assimilates into my being the horror of the Holocaust, this gives meaning to Jewish survival.”

The Dead Sea Scrolls illustrate the distinctive scholarly treatment accorded relic books. These manuscripts dating from the third to the first centuries B.C.E. were discovered in the mid-twentieth century C.E. One quarter of them contain texts of the Hebrew Bible, the earliest biblical texts now in existence. They have been the object of intense scholarly comparison with younger biblical manuscripts in order to legitimize and correct the biblical text. The other three-quarters of the scrolls contain non-biblical and previously unknown compositions. They also have received intense scrutiny as important sources for the history and religion of Judaism in the last centuries B.C.E.

Thus interest has focused on interpretation of the semantic dimension of the non-biblical scrolls, while the biblical scrolls are ritualized more in the iconic dimension as relic books to legitimize the biblical text. Modern culture treats some of these ancient texts as relics (iconic dimension) while using others primarily for interpretive purposes (semantic dimension). The distinction is confirmed by the display of the scrolls in the aptly named “Shrine of the Book” at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem: a biblical scroll (Isaiah) receives pride of place in the central display. The dominance of its iconic dimension for both scholars and the public confirms its status as a relic text.

The scriptures of most religious traditions presuppose an original relic text that persists only in its iconic copies. The original has long since disappeared and in most cases never existed at all, at least in a textual form resembling its current manifestations (see for example on the Bible, Beal 2011). The desire to nevertheless legitimize the tradition by means of a relic original generates beliefs in its existence in heaven (Parmenter 2009). Thus the Torah written by God before the creation of the world, or the Qur’an that stays with Allah, or the Golden Tablets of Mormon reclaimed by angels ground religious traditions in heavenly relic texts that legitimize all their earthly copies. These relic texts cannot be viewed in a museum or place of worship, but belief in their existence can still serve to legitimize these scriptural traditions.

Relic texts legitimize a story about a community. People use them to identify with and place themselves in that story. This is one of the most important social functions of ritual: to demonstrate publicly one’s acceptance of a tradition and one’s place in a community (Rappaport 1999, 118-124). Relic texts frequently serve as important components of such rituals.

Relic texts are therefore an exception that proves the rule about ritualizing texts in three dimensions (Watts 2006). Though they are themselves not usually subject to semantic and performative ritualization, they owe their exceptional iconicity to the fact that other, non-relic, reproductions of the same text are ritualized in all three dimensions. When particular books are readily available for semantic, performative, and iconic ritualization, a few special exemplars can be set aside to serve purely iconic purposes as relic texts. The different effects of ritualizing books in each of the dimensions helps explain the popular appeal and social function of relic

texts. Since ritualizing a text's iconic dimension bestows legitimacy, people will go to great lengths and spend large sums of money to own and display a relic text. They do so in hopes of legitimizing a nation, a religion, a public institution like a museum, library or university, or just themselves.

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